

The Impact of Religion on the ASEAN Community Education Strategy

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Abstract: *The ASEAN Community Education Strategy, as a crucial mechanism for promoting regional integration in Southeast Asia, has been profoundly influenced by religious factors in multiple dimensions throughout its formation and development. Based on policy text analysis and comparative research, this study systematically examines how major religions—primarily Buddhism and Islam—shape the ASEAN education strategy across six dimensions: educational goal-setting, content infiltration, resource allocation, regional coordination, modernization processes, and transnational cooperation. While religion performs positive functions through value internalization and resource integration, it also generates structural tensions due to doctrinal differences and traditional inertia. At the goal level, religion has shaped an educational orientation centered on spiritual cultivation and moral education. At the content level, religious curricula and interdisciplinary penetration have formed a distinctive knowledge system. At the resource level, religious institutions have compensated for the inadequacy of public education provision, but have also led to imbalanced allocation. At the coordination level, religious diversity has enriched cultural capital while increasing the difficulty of policy integration. At the modernization level, deep-seated conflicts exist between traditional religious education and modern educational concepts in terms of goals, methods, and curriculum design. At the cooperation level, religious networks provide unique channels for cross-border educational exchange. ASEAN needs to construct a positive interaction mechanism between religion and education under the framework of the “ASEAN Way,” advancing educational modernization while respecting cultural pluralism, in order to achieve the strategic goal of regional educational integration.*

Keywords: ASEAN Community, Education Strategy, Religious Influence, Educational Modernization, Regional Integration.

1. Formation and Development of the ASEAN Community Education Strategy

The ASEAN Community Education Strategy is not a single document, but rather a collective term for a series of strategic plans and action systems launched by ASEAN in the field of education, centered on the construction of the Community (encompassing the three pillars of political-security, economic, and socio-cultural cooperation). Its core objective is to promote regional integration through educational synergy. Since the beginning of the 21st century, ASEAN member states have increasingly demonstrated a trend of extending cooperation from political, security, and economic domains to Socio-cultural and educational fields. As a vital component of the Socio-Cultural Community, education serves as a key element in accelerating and deepening the process of ASEAN regional integration. From its inception, the ASEAN Community has embodied a collection of organizational, decision-making, and management approaches represented by the “ASEAN Way,” highlighting the core concepts and practical plans of inter-state cooperation in the region. The “ASEAN Way” functions both as a methodology for resolving international issues based on respect for Southeast Asian cultural norms, and as “the ability of leaders to prioritize consensus-based, non-confrontational approaches in informal decision-making processes.” This determines that cooperative behaviors among ASEAN states are premised on each country’s own issues and priorities, thereby giving rise to a multilateral cooperative approach.

Building upon the “ASEAN Way,” the three pillars of the ASEAN Community form a mutually reinforcing triangular framework. The prosperous coexistence of the Economic Community and Political-Security Community requires high-level coordination from the Socio-Cultural Community, with

the trend toward maximizing synergistic effects among the three pillars becoming increasingly prominent. From this perspective, education undoubtedly plays an irreplaceable role in ASEAN Community building, characterized by multiple functions including fostering a sense of belonging among member states, enhancing national soft power, cultivating human resources to drive economic growth, and expanding transnational multilateral cooperation models.

In terms of top-level design, the developmental positioning of education in ASEAN has gradually become clearer and more concrete through the continuous advancement of policies such as the ASEAN Charter, the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint, Education Work Plans, and ASEAN Community Roadmaps. At the 14th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN first proposed integrating the education sector into the construction of the Community’s three pillars, establishing education’s “formal identity” in promoting regional integration [1]. On November 22, 2015, the 27th ASEAN Summit held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, released the “ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025” (ASCC Blueprint 2025), which covers five major sections, 18 key areas, and related elements. Specific priorities span all aspects from basic to higher education, comprising important agendas such as launching future-oriented education reforms, deepening early childhood and vocational education reforms, strengthening cross-regional coupling and integration among education, industrial training, and research, and promoting partnerships among stakeholders to expand education’s social service functions. The Blueprint delineates strategic plans from institutional reform to resource expansion, establishing a clear policy agenda framework for ASEAN’s educational development [2].

Regarding organizational structure, the ASEAN educational governance decision-making chain primarily consists of three

institutional levels: ASEAN ministerial bodies, ASEAN senior officials' bodies, and ASEAN working groups, implementing a three-tier management system of "decision-making—execution—specialized management." Among these, ASEAN member states advance educational reforms under the policy coordination of the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting; the ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting on Education (SOM-ED) is responsible for implementing priorities promoted by ASEAN Leaders and the ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting; while the ASEAN Education Working Group coordinates transnational and cross-regional educational cooperation projects, adopting a working model of ASEAN Plus Three (China, Japan, Korea) Education Ministers' Meeting plus East Asia Summit Education Ministers' Meeting. The multi-stakeholder governance mechanism framework established by ASEAN emphasizes intergovernmental organizations as the core, forming a parallel organizational structure led by ASEAN Education Ministers. This not only facilitates the connection and integration of national education systems but also, in a sense, aims to circumvent institutionalized arrangements, responding to the "ASEAN Way" principle of resolving issues through informal agendas.

In terms of action objectives, promoting regionalized coordination and development of member states' education systems represents a strategic choice for accelerating ASEAN integration. The following four aspects reflect the core aspirations of ASEAN Community educational action. First, building an ASEAN Community social network to assist member states' education departments in establishing resource sharing and co-construction mechanisms, and accelerating their integration into the regional education space. Second, fully unleashing the human resource dividends brought by regionalized educational reforms, intensifying innovation in vocational education and technology across ASEAN countries, vigorously promoting lifelong education to adapt to continuously increasing labor demands. Third, accelerating curriculum and educational reform processes in Southeast Asia, enabling learners to acquire core skills, environmental literacy, and digital capabilities required by the times, and ensuring comprehensive, high-quality educational opportunities for learners across ASEAN countries. Fourth, developing regionalized, high-quality standards for education, teaching, and training, and vigorously encouraging cross-border mobility of students and technical talent.

2. Strategic Deployment of the ASEAN Community Education Strategy

2.1 Building an Integrated Education Network with Multi-Stakeholder Synergy

Southeast Asian countries possess characteristics of diversified development, while educational development constitutes a vast systematic project. To "deeply anchor" the education systems of ASEAN countries requires clarifying the fundamental conditions and major developmental issues of education in each member state. On this premise, ASEAN constructs socialization pathways for the Community, creating an integrated education information network to achieve resource interaction and sharing. ASEAN member states negotiate and integrate their respective major

educational development issues, proactively deploying an ASEAN education strategy that is relatively aligned with Community standards while reflecting the primary demands of individual countries. This strategy mainly comprises six components: developing teacher and administrative personnel capabilities, strengthening curriculum development and assessment standards, enhancing education and teaching quality, enriching educational research paradigms, promoting equal educational opportunities, and improving education management levels. Its content covers multiple systemic domains including pre-school education, basic education, higher education, and vocational education [3].

2.2 Adopting a Project-Led Transnational Education Cooperation Model Within the Region

Approved by the 11th ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting, the ASEAN Work Plan on Education 2016-2020 was adopted at the 9th ASEAN Education Ministers' Meeting held in Malaysia from May 23-25, 2016. This plan established eight major work objectives and twenty priority areas for regional educational development under project leadership. Using this planning document as policy guidance, ASEAN has continuously introduced innovative educational concepts to the region, primarily taking action in the following areas: First, emphasizing the right to universal education and ASEAN integration education concepts, aiming to improve the quality of universal basic education and expand educational opportunities, with emphasis on increasing input of local historical and cultural knowledge to cultivate "ASEAN awareness." Second, advocating extensive use of information and communication technologies, supporting digital development in technical and vocational education and training sectors. Third, encouraging cross-sectoral cooperation to achieve sustainable development education goals, actively providing capacity-building programs for teachers and scholars, and establishing cooperation and coordination mechanisms. Fourth, implementing high-standard higher education quality assurance mechanisms, promoting higher education industry-university-research activities to serve socio-economic development [4].

2.3 Achieving Integrated Development of Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance

To achieve the goal of mutual recognition of various types of learning outcomes among ASEAN countries, ASEAN launched the ASEAN Qualifications Reference Framework (AQRF) in 2004. Since 2005, this framework has been comprehensively promoted and implemented across the entire ASEAN region, enhancing cooperation and exchange among educational institutions in member states and improving the overall standards of member states in education quality assessment and certification. Following the formal establishment of the ASEAN Community in December 2015, ASEAN continuously refined quality assurance frameworks and practical guidelines on the basis of earlier work, successively releasing supporting documents such as the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework, ASEAN Regional Guidelines for Higher Education Quality Assurance (Second Edition), and Qualifications Frameworks and Quality Assurance in Education and Training. These initiatives promote strengthened information connectivity and alignment

among member states in areas such as education quality standards, qualification certification, and credit systems, increasing both educational input and output [5].

2.4 Creating a Common Higher Education Space to Increase Global Cooperation Opportunities

On May 31, 2021, ASEAN member states' education ministers approved the new ASEAN Five-Year Work Plan on Education (2021-2025) [6], which prominently proposed the goal of creating a "Common Higher Education Space." This aims to construct a more flexible and adaptable cross-border education system by enhancing higher education quality standards, positioning it as a central hub for the integration of ASEAN's three Communities. This initiative seeks to promote the aggregation of human resources among countries to enhance ASEAN's comprehensive strength and create opportunities for ASEAN's participation in international education cooperation. ASEAN has mainly adopted the following key measures: First, establishing the principal position of higher education in ASEAN Community building. The two primary entities driving ASEAN dialogue partner cooperation and internationalization agendas are the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization-Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (SEAMEO-RIHED) and the ASEAN University Network (AUN), promoting higher education to occupy the core position in the Community value chain with substantial discourse power. Second, seeking regional cooperation mechanisms for higher education. ASEAN is currently promoting regionalization of higher education systems through systematic research, capacity empowerment, and building shared cooperation mechanisms, to achieve important goals such as cultivating globalized human resources, leading national technological innovation, fulfilling social responsibilities, and sustainable development. Third, encouraging ASEAN countries to enhance the internationalization level of higher education. On one hand, improving the internationalization of teaching—for example, Singapore and Malaysia advocate using English as the medium of instruction and encourage students to develop third languages. On the other hand, enhancing the internationalization of departmental management levels—for instance, the Philippines established the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to conduct quality management and resource coordination for higher education internationalization projects, with specific responsibilities including mobilizing international and regional institutional networks to establish connections between local higher education institutions and overseas relevant institutions, and executing assessments and certifications of international and cross-border education programs [7].

3. The Influence of Religion on the ASEAN Community Education Strategy

3.1 Educational Goal Setting

Religion is widely disseminated throughout the ASEAN region and has exerted profound influence on the setting of educational goals in member states. In some countries where Buddhism is the state religion, such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, Buddhist doctrines and values are deeply integrated into educational objectives. Thailand's

education system is profoundly influenced by Buddhism; its educational goals not only emphasize knowledge transmission and skill cultivation but also stress shaping students' moral character and spiritual world through Buddhist education. In Thai school education, values such as compassion, tolerance, and kindness are often incorporated to cultivate students' moral concepts and sense of social responsibility, enabling students to uphold Buddhist spiritual concepts during their growth and pursue inner peace and harmony. In some Thai schools, students are arranged to practice simple Buddhist meditation daily to help them develop concentration and inner tranquility. Furthermore, schools organize students to participate in Buddhist charitable activities, such as donating materials to impoverished areas and volunteering at temples, allowing students to experience the spirit of Buddhist compassion in practice and enhance their sense of social responsibility [8]. In Malaysia and Indonesia, where Islam predominates, Islamic educational concepts play a leading role in setting educational goals. Malaysia's educational goals emphasize cultivating citizens with Islamic values, enabling students to deeply study Islamic doctrines, jurisprudence, and ethical morality while receiving modern education, becoming devout Muslims and responsible members of society. Malaysian schools offer specialized Islamic courses teaching the Quran, Hadith, and Islamic jurisprudence to cultivate students' religious knowledge and faith literacy. Additionally, schools strengthen students' sense of identity and belonging to Islam through religious activities such as prayer ceremonies and Ramadan observances, promoting students to establish correct life goals and values under the guidance of religious faith. Religion influences the shaping of students' spiritual world and values. The doctrines and values of different religions provide students with different spiritual guidance and value orientations, affecting their understanding of life's meaning, moral standards, and social relationships. Buddhism emphasizes inner peace, compassion, and karma, enabling students to maintain a peaceful mindset when facing life's difficulties and challenges, treat others with compassion, and focus on self-cultivation and moral development. Islam emphasizes faith in, reverence for, and submission to Allah, cultivating students' piety, integrity, and kindness, enabling them to follow Islamic doctrines and moral norms in daily life, fulfill religious obligations, and actively participate in social activities to contribute to social development and progress. Christianity emphasizes love, forgiveness, and redemption, guiding students to treat others with love, forgive others' faults, and pursue soul salvation and eternal life, cultivating students' love, compassion, and spirit of tolerance [9].

3.2 Infiltration of Educational Content

Religion's infiltration into the educational content of the ASEAN Community is multifaceted, manifested not only in the setting of religious courses but also deeply penetrating other subject areas as well as campus culture and activities. In many ASEAN countries, religious courses constitute an important component of school education. Taking Thailand as an example, Buddhist courses occupy a prominent position in Thai school education. Public schools in Thailand generally offer Buddhist courses; from primary to secondary school, students must study basic Buddhist doctrines, history, and rituals. At Thai Buddhist universities, such as Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Buddhist

studies serve as the core, offering a rich variety of Buddhist-related majors and courses covering Buddhist philosophy, Pali language, Buddhist art, and Buddhist history. These courses not only cultivate professional Buddhist talents but also provide learning platforms for ordinary people to deeply understand Buddhism. During the teaching process, students comprehend Buddhist wisdom and thought through studying Buddhist classics such as the Agamas and Prajnaparamita Sutras, enhancing their religious literacy and spiritual realm [10]. In Malaysia and Indonesia, Islamic courses constitute an important segment of educational content. Malaysian schools treat Islamic courses as compulsory subjects; students begin systematic study of Islamic fundamentals from primary school, including Quran recitation, Islamic doctrine explanation, and Islamic jurisprudence. As grades advance, course content gradually deepens to cover Islamic history, philosophy, and ethics. Indonesia's education system similarly emphasizes Islamic education, with corresponding Islamic course arrangements from kindergarten through university. In some Indonesian religious schools, students spend considerable time studying Islamic classics and doctrines and training in religious rituals such as prayer and fasting, in addition to ordinary cultural courses. Through these courses, students gain deep understanding of Islam's belief system and cultural connotations, strengthening their sense of identity and belonging to the religion. Beyond specialized religious courses, religious elements permeate teaching content in other subjects. In some Buddhist-majority countries, teaching in literature, history, and art often incorporates Buddhist culture. In history teaching, the development of Buddhism in Thailand constitutes important teaching content; students better understand Thai history and culture by studying Buddhism's introduction, flourishing, and influence on Thai society, politics, and culture. In Islam-majority countries, teaching in mathematics and science is sometimes combined with Islamic values. In science teaching, teachers guide students to consider the relationship between science and religion from an Islamic perspective, emphasizing that scientific research should conform to Islamic ethical and moral norms, cultivating students' correct scientific views and values [11].

3.3 Educational Resource Allocation

Religion plays an important role in educational resource allocation within the ASEAN Community, both providing abundant resource support for education and exerting certain influence on the distribution and utilization of educational resources. Religious institutions and organizations in the ASEAN region actively participate in educational undertakings, providing substantial material and financial support for education. In many countries, religious groups have founded various schools and educational institutions covering all educational stages from kindergarten to university. Taking Buddhism as an example, in Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, numerous temples serve not only as venues for religious activities but also as important educational institutions. Thai temple schools provide free education for local children, including Buddhist knowledge, cultural courses, and life skills training. The operating funds for these temple schools mainly come from believers' donations, temple property income, and partial government funding. The existence of temple schools compensates to some extent for local educational resource deficiencies,

providing educational opportunities for children from impoverished families.

In Malaysia and Indonesia, Islamic religious institutions and organizations have also actively engaged in the education sector. Some Malaysian Islamic religious schools, such as Madrasahs, are established and operated by religious groups or private funding, providing students with comprehensive Islamic education and general cultural education. These schools' funding sources include government subsidies, donations from various sectors of society, and self-raised funds from religious institutions. Indonesian Islamic charitable organizations support the construction and development of schools in impoverished areas through donations of funds and materials, improving school teaching conditions and providing scholarships and learning supplies for students. These inputs from religious institutions and organizations enrich educational resources and promote educational popularization and development. Religious beliefs also influence the distribution and utilization of educational resources. In regions with strong religious atmospheres, educational resources often tilt toward religious education. In countries where Buddhism is the state religion, government investment in Buddhist education is relatively substantial, including support for Buddhist school construction, teacher training, and textbook compilation. The Thai government's financial investment in Buddhist universities increases annually, used to improve teaching facilities, introduce advanced teaching technology and equipment, and enhance the quality and level of Buddhist education. In Islam-majority countries, Islamic education also receives considerable resource support. The Malaysian government has specially established Islamic education funding items in the education budget to support the development of Islamic schools and the promotion of religious education.

3.4 Impact of Religious Diversity on Educational Coordination

The ASEAN region exhibits significant religious diversity, with Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and numerous indigenous religions and folk beliefs coexisting. While this religious diversity brings rich cultural resources to education, it also triggers a series of educational coordination challenges [12]. Different religious beliefs and doctrines pose distinctly different requirements for educational concepts. These different educational concepts require coordination and integration during the implementation of the ASEAN Community education strategy to ensure consistency and compatibility of educational goals. However, due to the uniqueness of each religious belief and adherents' commitment to their religious doctrines, achieving coordination of educational concepts is no easy task. The doctrines and classics of different religions also pose different requirements for educational content. When these religious contents are integrated into the education system, how to reasonably arrange teaching content for each religion within limited teaching time and avoid conflicts and repetitions in teaching content constitutes one of the challenges facing educational decision-makers [13]. Furthermore, for students of non-native faiths, how to ensure they can receive comprehensive education while respecting different religious cultures is also an issue requiring resolution. For example, in

some religiously diverse schools, some students may show no interest in or difficulty understanding certain religious teaching content, requiring educators to flexibly adjust teaching content and methods according to students' actual situations to meet different students' learning needs. In terms of school management, different religious festivals, rituals, and customs require schools to make reasonable arrangements and coordination. For example, during Islam's Ramadan, Muslim students need to fast during daylight hours, requiring schools to adjust teaching schedules and dietary arrangements to accommodate students' religious needs. Christian holidays such as Christmas and Easter may also affect school teaching order to some extent. Additionally, the roles and status of religious clergy in school education need clear definition. In some religious schools, religious clergy undertake primary teaching responsibilities; their teaching methods and management styles may differ from modern educational concepts. How to coordinate relationships between religious clergy and ordinary teachers to ensure the scientific effectiveness of school educational management is a question educational administration departments need to consider. Religious extremist ideology deviates from the peaceful essence of religion, conducting violent terrorist activities in the name of religion, posing serious threats to educational security and social stability. In the ASEAN region, some extremist organizations use religion to conduct deceptive propaganda, misleading some people, especially young people, onto the path of radicalization. The spread of these extremist ideologies not only disrupts normal educational order but also affects students' physical and mental health and value formation [14].

3.5 Conflict Between Religion and Educational Modernization

Traditional religious concepts and modern educational concepts conflict in multiple aspects. In terms of educational goals, religious education often focuses on cultivating believers' faith in and compliance with religious doctrines, emphasizing spiritual pursuits and soul salvation. Modern educational concepts, however, place greater emphasis on developing students' comprehensive qualities, including knowledge and skills, innovative capabilities, social responsibility, and international perspectives, to meet the demands of modern societal development. This divergence in educational goals may lead to disagreements regarding educational resource allocation and teaching priorities. In regions with strong religious atmospheres, there may be excessive emphasis on religious education at the expense of students' comprehensive development in science and technology, humanities, and social sciences, thereby affecting students' future competitiveness.

In teaching methodology, religious education predominantly employs traditional lecture-based approaches, focusing on explaining and memorizing religious classics and emphasizing the retention and comprehension of religious doctrines. For example, in Islamic religious education, students are required to extensively memorize the Quran and Hadith, comprehending religious doctrines through repeated recitation and explanation. Modern educational concepts advocate diverse teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, and cooperative learning,

emphasizing the cultivation of students' autonomous learning capabilities, innovative thinking, and practical abilities. These modern teaching methods stress students' active participation and experiential learning, differing considerably from traditional religious teaching approaches. When introducing modern teaching methods into religious education or promoting them within education systems influenced by religion, resistance from traditional religious perspectives may be encountered. Some religious figures, for instance, believe that modern teaching methods may undermine the solemnity and authority of religious education.

Regarding curriculum design, religious education courses primarily revolve around religious classics, doctrines, and rituals, possessing strong religious specialization and insularity. For example, Buddhist religious courses mainly include Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist history, and Buddhist scripture studies; these course contents are relatively independent with low integration with other disciplines. Modern educational concepts advocate interdisciplinary curriculum designs, emphasizing interconnections and integration between different subjects to cultivate students' comprehensive literacy. Within education systems influenced by religion, how to preserve characteristic religious courses while integrating modern scientific knowledge and interdisciplinary courses to achieve organic integration of religious education and modern educational curricula remains a challenge requiring resolution [15].

3.6 Religion Promoting Transnational Educational Cooperation

Religious and cultural exchange plays a unique role in promoting educational cooperation within ASEAN and with external countries. Religion can serve as a bridge and bond for international educational exchange; many religious organizations possess extensive connections and influence internationally, and cooperation and exchange between religious organizations can promote international cooperation in the education sector [16]. Religious organizations strengthen educational connections between Buddhist countries and promote sharing of Buddhist educational resources and exchange of educational experiences through hosting international Buddhist education seminars, Buddhist cultural exchange activities, and Buddhist educational cooperation projects. Similarly, international organizations of Islam and Christianity have conducted similar educational exchange and cooperation activities within their respective religious domains, providing learning and exchange platforms for believers from different countries and regions. Religious schools and educational institutions have played active roles in cross-border education. For example, some Malaysian Islamic religious schools attract Muslim students from other countries to study; these schools not only provide high-quality religious education but also emphasize cultivating students' comprehensive qualities, providing students with an internationalized educational environment. Through cross-border education, students can encounter cultures and educational concepts from different countries, broaden international perspectives, and enhance cross-cultural communication capabilities. Furthermore, religious education can promote academic exchanges between different countries. Many religious research institutions and scholars have

conducted extensive international academic cooperation, jointly exploring issues related to religion and society, religion and education through hosting academic conferences and cooperative research projects, promoting the internationalization of religious studies development. Religion also plays a role in promoting international exchange in talent cultivation; through religious education, students enhance their understanding and tolerance of different cultures, thereby better adapting to internationalized development needs. Meanwhile, religious organizations and institutions can also provide students with opportunities to participate in international affairs through international volunteer activities and international charity projects, cultivating students' international cooperation awareness and sense of social responsibility. For example, some Christian church-organized international volunteer activities encourage students to participate in community service and educational aid projects in other countries, allowing students to understand different countries' social cultures in practice and improve their international exchange capabilities and sense of social responsibility. To fully leverage religion's potential in promoting international educational exchange and cooperation, it is necessary to strengthen the internationalization construction of religious education and improve the quality and level of religious education. Simultaneously, establishing and improving mechanisms and platforms for international exchange and cooperation in religious education, strengthening communication and coordination between religious organizations and educational institutions of various countries, and jointly promoting the in-depth development of international educational exchange and cooperation [17].

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